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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet discusses one of the most essential but often misunderstood tasks facing nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations today: lobbying. It is addressed to Americans who volunteer their time and money to promote causes they believe will make this a better world. The pamphlet encourages citizens to lobby for two reasons. First, because virtually every aspect of our lives is affected by government, and in a democracy, government is set up to respond to the wishes of the people. The second reason citizens should lobby is that if they don't someone else will. Every conceivable cause has its advocates. Lobbying is defined as a means of persuading the members of a legislature to enact legislation favorable to a cause or defeat or repeal legislation unfavorable to a cause. Misconceptions concerning the honorability of lobbying are presented. Lobbying by tax-exempt groups has been sanctioned by Congress. An effective lobbyist needs three things: basic facts, belief in a cause, and common sense. Lobbying can be fun and stimulating. Not only might lobbyists help bring about that change that they feel is so important, but they may also gain a great deal of satisfaction from lobbying itself. (RM)

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Lobby? You?

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of Course You Can . . . and You Should!

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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September 1980

This pamphlet is addressed to the thousands and thousands of Americans who volunteer their time and money to promote causes they believe will make this a better world.

It discusses one of the most essential but often misunderstood tasks facing nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations today: lobbying.

It is intended to help not only volunteers and staff of such organizations but all those in the private sector who are equally convinced that the well being of voluntary agencies is indispensible.

INDEPENDENT SECTOR . . .

. . . is an organization created to preserve and enhance our national tradition of giving, volunteering and not-for-profit initiative.

The Voting Members are organizations with national interests and impact in philanthropy, voluntary action and other activity related to the independent pursuit of the educational, scientific, health, welfare, cultural and religious life of the nation.

LOBBY? YOU?

Of course you can lobby! And you should!

Anyone who can make a phone call or write a letter can lobby. If you believe in some cause or other, really believe that in some measure, great or small, this would be a better world if your cause were advanced, then by all means you should lobby.

Why? Two reasons. First, because virtually every aspect of our lives, every institution, every activity is affected by government. And in America, as in other democracies, government responds to the wishes of the people. This is true whether the government is that of the Village of Skokie, the State of California, or the United States of America.

At times this may not be apparent and at times it seems to take forever—and at times you have to "throw the rascals out"—but sooner or later the actions of our governments reflect the wishes of our people. There is one big IF. Legislation reflects what the people want ONLY if you and enough others take the trouble to let your legislators know what you want.

Don't Get Left Out

The second reason you should lobby, meaning not just you as an individual but the organization you joined because it stands for something you strongly believe in, is that if you don't, someone else will. Every conceivable cause—save the whales, preserve neighborhood schools, conquer leukemia, promote the arts, prohibit abortion, permit abortion,

raise the speed limit, fight racial injustice—has its advocates. Competition for a place in the legislative sun is ceaseless.

Lobbying today is a must. Any organization that does not lobby, or an organization that does not lobby well, is almost certain to get left out.

What Do We Mean: Lobbying?

Before going further, it might help to explain exactly what we mean by the term lobbying. We mean nothing more nor less than trying to persuade the members of a legislature—whether city council, county commission, state legislature, or United States House of Representatives or Senate—to enact legislation favorable to your cause or, on occasion, defeat or repeal legislation unfavorable to your cause. It's that simple. The legislation may set up a new program, change an existing one, guarantee certain rights, appropriate funds, etc.

Lobbying Is Honorable

Regrettably, there are still some persons for whom the word "lobbying" carries an ugly connotation. To them it conjures up visions of shady deals, favors bought and sold, money passed under the table. Indeed, there was a period in our history when such a picture would have been all too accurate. Today, however, despite a few well-publicized exceptions, the great majority of legislators and lobbyists alike are honest, dedicated servants.

Another misconception is that you've got to do something for your legislator if you hope to get him or her to do some-

thing for you; you've got to wine them and dine them, make a big campaign contribution, and so forth. This is not true. Naturally any legislator tends to be more readily available to big contributors and to politically powerful friends. But it does not follow that these are the only people who count. Far from it.

YOU Count

You are a constituent! You and the rest of the people in your district who go to the polls are really the ones who carry the weight. Your legislator needs you every bit as much as you need him or her. **You** count and don't you forget it.

Still, there are two things you can give your legislator without spending more than the price of a postage stamp and without running afoul of the code of ethics. One is information. Your organization is the authority in its field. You can give your legislator information he or she doesn't possibly have the time to get any other way. Second is recognition. Whenever your legislator does something on your behalf, helps your organization, advances your cause, show him or her your appreciation—and let the world know it.

Tax-Exempt Groups CAN Lobby

There are those who feel it is somehow improper for nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations to lobby. It's all right for business, they reason, because corporations pay taxes, but it's questionable, if not downright wrong, for the tax-exempt sector. Again, there was a time in history when such an attitude might have been warranted.

Up until 1976, tax-exempt organizations were in danger of losing their tax-exempt status—and along with it the ability to assure supporters their contributions were tax deductible—if they engaged in "substantial" lobbying. Unfortunately, "substantial" was never defined and as a result most tax-exempt organizations either soft pedalled lobbying or refrained from it altogether.

Sanctioned by Congress

All of that was changed in 1976 when Congress removed all doubt as to the legality of lobbying by nonprofit tax-exempt organizations (specifically those under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code) by writing into the income tax laws authorization for each such organization to spend a certain percentage of its income on lobbying.*

Not only did Congress recognize the validity of lobbying by such groups but it came right out and used the very words "lobby" and "lobbying".

Lobbying Is Not For Experts Only

Sometimes people won't lobby because they're afraid they don't know how. They are staunch supporters of their cause, they recognize the importance of lobbying, and they know it pays off. Yet they hold back on the mistaken notion that lobbying is only for experts.

Like anything else, the more you know

*This authorization does not extend to religious groups, which, at their own request, remain under the pre-1976 provision. It should also be noted that lobbying by private foundations and business firms is governed by separate legislation, although, of course, the basic lobbying techniques are equally applicable.

about how to lobby, the better you will be. But, again, if you can make a phone call or write a letter, you can lobby.

All you need to be a lobbyist—not just "a" lobbyist but an effective lobbyist—are three things:

1. A few basic facts
2. Belief in your cause
3. Common sense

The most important single thing a lobbyist needs to know is his or her subject. What is the substance of the legislation you are proposing (or opposing)? Why is it so important? What will happen if it passes? What will happen if it does not pass? How much will it cost?

Normally, the place to get these facts is the headquarters of the organization you have joined because you believe in its objectives. Normally, whoever asks you to get involved in lobbying, perhaps the chairman of your legislative committee or the executive director of your association, will provide these facts along with the call for action. No responsible organization is going to ask its volunteers to lobby without arming them with the facts.

Know Your Legislator

It certainly helps to know the legislator or legislators you contact. What are their interests? What are their backgrounds? What is their record of support? What positions do they hold in the legislature? Who is the chair of the committee that will consider your proposal? Who is the chief spokesman for the opposition?

Finally, the good lobbyist knows how

the system works: what steps a proposed municipal ordinance or state law or federal appropriation bill goes through from introduction to enactment; which committees will consider the legislation.

All of this information should be provided by your staff and volunteer leadership. And before you know it, you may well be the one who's providing the information to the beginning lobbyist.

Conviction Counts

Facts alone are not enough. Without conviction, dedication to the cause, loyalty to the organization, and determination to see the job through no matter how long it takes (and it can indeed take long!), a lobbyist won't be very effective. Far better to say "no" than to agree to lobby for something when your heart isn't in it.

The true believer is the volunteer who is greeted not only by name but by "Oh yes, let's see now. You're with the wildlife people." When they greet you like that, your battle is half won.

Concentration Counts

This is not to be equated with so-called "single-issue politics" wherein a group places its own narrow interests above any and all other concerns. It is indeed regrettable when a lobbyist, whether volunteer or professional, takes the position that anyone who does not suport his cause must be thrown out of office no matter how excellent his or her overall record may be.

What it does say is that the effective lobbyist should concentrate total effort on the one particular cause and not

scatter shots, speaking for one group one day and another the next.

Common Sense

The minimum principles you need to know are these: **be brief; be clear; be accurate; be persuasive; be timely; be persistent; be grateful.**

These common sense principles apply whether you're lobbying by telephone, by letter, or face to face. The only one that's a bit difficult for the beginner is timing. There are good times, better times, and best times and, until you've become an expert in your own right, your organization's staff or volunteer leadership should call the shots on timing.

Never promise reward for good behavior or threaten retribution for failure to support you. Leave politics at home. Be persuasive rather than argumentative or demanding. Don't knock the opposition; they probably believe in their position as sincerely as you believe in yours.

When you write, keep your letter to a single page—literally. If you need more space, enclose an attachment elaborating on that one-page summary. Be absolutely sure you spell your legislator's name correctly and get the address right. If you don't, he or she will wonder how credible the rest of your letter is. And, of course, always personalize your letter. Get the facts from your organization but use your own words on your own stationery.

Face To Face

The first time you meet face to face with your United States Senator—or, for that matter, your city councilman—you

probably will have butterflies in your stomach. It would be unusual if you didn't.

If you'd feel better having someone else along, fine. Just so the one who accompanies you can also speak to the matter at hand and is not obviously just along for the ride. And while two may be better than one, three is not better than two. Hold it down.

Always Be Brief

Again, as in writing, be brief. Make an appointment, be on time, state your case, and leave. Plan to cover your topic in five minutes if possible, ten minutes at the most. Don't linger unless your legislator chooses to prolong the meeting.

If you get hit with any questions you can't answer, admit it and provide the answers later. Don't bluff—it always shows. When you depart, hand your host a written summary—again, a one-pager—of your position and state exactly what it is you want him or her to do about it.

Aides Are Influential

Do not be offended if you don't get to see the boss. Even if you had a firm appointment, you may be referred instead to an assistant. The demands on a legislator's time are unbelievable and quite often he or she cannot avoid last minute changes in schedule.

Never underestimate the importance of an aide. Treat him or her just as you would your legislator, not only as a matter of courtesy but because the aide is in a position to advance your cause or sink it without a trace.

THANK YOU!

When you get back home, or after you've talked with your legislator by phone, or after he or she has voted your way or done something else to help you, send a thank you letter. The vast majority of all mail a legislator gets is either asking for personal favors, complaining about something the government has or has not done, or blasting the legislator for something he or she has or has not done. A thank you letter really scores. Besides, it's the polite thing to do.

Always Report Back

Report back to your organization. Whom did you see or talk with? What did you discuss? What was his or her position? Your report and those of other volunteers are indispensable to your leadership in planning strategy.

You Lobby?

Of course you will. It's fun; it's stimulating; you'll learn a lot; you'll be a real participant in this business called democracy. And not only will you help bring about that change you feel is so important but you'll get more satisfaction out of lobbying than you ever imagined.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

League of Women Voters, 1730 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, "Public Action Kit". Publication #629, $3.00.

National Mental Health Association, 1800 North Kent Street, Arlington, VA 22209, "Legislative Action at the State Level". $1.00.

U.S. Congress, "How Our Laws are Made". Single copies free from your Representative or Senator.

Chamber of Commerce of the U.S., Publications Fulfillment Department, 1615 H Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20062, "A Letter Writer's Guide to Congress". 1-99 copies, $.30 each (minimum order $3.00).

(Also from U.S. Chamber of Commerce) "1981 Congressional Handbook". $2.25 single issue.

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